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ABSTRACT

Focusing on a meeting held in January 1983, this pamphlet describes the Forum on the Productivity of Plain English, from which grew the permanent Plain English Forum, which is committed to spreading the message that plain English is good business. The pamphlet includes quotations from leaders in business and industry explaining why they feel that plain English is a management tool that improves their customer relations. It also lists people who attended the forum and the topics of discussion, which include different approaches to plain English, plain English and the law, the social benefits of plain English, and the cost benefits of plain English.
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The Productivity of Plain English

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US Department of Commerce

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On January 5, 1983, the U.S. Department of Commerce sponsored a Forum on the Productivity of Plain English. Thirty-business and professional people gathered at this working session. These participants from the private sector later set up a permanent Plain English Forum, which is committed to spread the message that plain English is good business. The Commerce Department is represented on the Plain English Forum's steering committee.

Most participants at the January 1983 meeting represented corporations that are successfully using plain language in daily business with their customers. For these companies, plain English is a management tool that improves their customer relations. Why and how are they using this tool? Here are answers, in selected quotes, from people who attended the meeting.

Are you interested in working with the permanent Plain English Forum that grew out of this January 1983 meeting? Write or call: Office of Consumer Affairs, Room 5725, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C. 20230 (202/377-5001).

Plain English in Business and Government



Malcolm Baldrige
Secretary of Commerce

Private and public sectors are developing the same sorts of communication problems, and for much the same reasons.

One reason is that every organization or profession adopts its own jargon, as a matter of pride. It develops complicated phrases and uses them as signs of expertise. Another reason is the cautious nature of governments and businesses. People sometimes use vague phrases to play it safe.

We at the Commerce Department are fighting bad language habits. In a lot of the letters that used to be drafted for my signature, I literally couldn't tell whether I was saying Yes or No. I finally brought all our letter writers together and said, "Please write simply and directly and clearly what you want me to say. And always say Yes or No." Another thing we did was to program some of our computers so that they won't print gobbledygook words like *optimize*. This has all resulted in real improvement. It is a refreshing change—for us and, in the long run, for the American public.

We are, believe me, talking about productivity. When people write letters and reports that are clear enough and simple enough and accurate enough and short enough—the time it saves the reader is immense. And that is productivity.

As far as the business community is concerned, the best way to discourage bad habits is to emphasize the profits that can result from simple language. The plain English programs of your companies prove this. Your well-written contracts, warranties, forms, insurance policies, and information brochures are helping you to serve your customers better and improve productivity.

We're going to work with you. We hope this forum will be the beginning of a joint venture that carries clear speech to all corners of the country.

Trends in Plain English

Alan Siegel
Forum Chairman
President
Siegel & Gale



For the plain English movement to survive and grow, we must emphasize the cost effectiveness of clarity. We must tie the economic benefits afforded by plain English into the current preoccupation with productivity to generate renewed enthusiasm for this very worthwhile movement. I sense that the plain-English movement is not sitting on a plateau after an intense six-year period when we all made significant progress.

Fortunately, the lessons that we've learned over the last six years make it possible to take on this new challenge. We have, I believe, finally deflated the objections raised by lawyers against simplifying traditional legal language. Also, during this period, we've seen plain English develop into a real discipline, a formal discipline.

A difficulty faced by the plain English movement is the difficulty of quantifying the cost effectiveness of clarity. I have been unable to convince clients to spend time and money tracking the results of plain English insurance policies, loan notes, or even invoices. Many variables, of course, will have to be monitored over a significant period of time to verify whether or not potential savings are realized; but there are also a number of immediate savings that can be measured as soon as a project is completed. The same principles that apply to business forms apply to government forms, as well, and it's logical to expect that both business and government can save money by communicating more clearly and more efficiently.

Who Attended the Forum?

Lee L. Gray

Director of Consumer Affairs
U.S. Department of Commerce

We're at this forum to talk about plain English in the marketplace, plain English as a business tool that produces payoffs—fewer complaints, more satisfied customers, better corporate image, more return business.

Most of you here today are corporate representatives; you speak for a generous diversity of business sectors. Banks. Retail chains. Pharmaceutical companies. Casualty insurance companies. Life insurance companies. An automobile manufacturer. An appliance manufacturer. An oil company. A market research corporation. A publisher of business forms. A home-owner warranty company.

In simplifying your business writing, your companies used quite different approaches. You acted for different reasons, too. Some of you did make a public commitment to conduct your business in plain English. Others said, in effect, "If we provide simple forms and clear, useful consumer information, perhaps we'll gain a competitive edge." Both are valid reasons for using plain language.

The rest of you at this meeting bring other perspectives. Quite a few represent trade or professional associations. Some are already plain English supporters, while others are saying, "Show me." We also have with us language simplification specialists, a TV news commentator, and a state legislator. With so many varying viewpoints, motivations, business sectors, and professions, we should hear lively discussions today.

What Did They Discuss?

- Different Approaches to Plain English
- Plain English and the Law
- The Social Benefits of Plain English
- The Cost Benefits of Plain English

1. Different Approaches to Plain English

Here's how J. C. Penney develops consumer information materials:

- ☐ We look at the entire system. It's tempting just to hand the customer a booklet and say, "Go to it." But we had a situation, for instance, where we also needed materials that the service manager could use in talking to the customer. And then we simplified the estimate forms and sales slips, too.
- ☐ We don't use experts in the subject matter to develop the material. They can't draw themselves far enough away from the technical areas to develop materials that the customer can understand.
- ☐ We assume that the written word is the last resort and look for other ways. Can symbols help communicate the message? Are there design changes needed? Are there film or audiovisual ways of getting the message across?
- ☐ We keep the objective of the material in mind. Once the goal is defined, it's easier to focus your response.
- ☐ We always test the materials on our customers. You can develop what appear to be beautiful materials, but the only way you can really find out if they work is by testing them.

Hazel Schoenberg

Manager, Consumer Information
J. C. Penney Company, Inc.

Our STAR computer program has been used to make General Motors' shop manuals and service bulletins easier to read. We've also used STAR to simplify the owner's manuals and the new car warranty.

Density of language is the main problem in efforts to write clearly. Modern English has come a long way in reducing sentence length, but in its place it is now using longer words. This defeats its purpose, as it now tends to cram too much meaning in too small a unit.

Our STAR computer program, the simplified approach to readability, helps clarify dense language. By listing words of three or more syllables, the computer printout makes it easier to find and remove dense words from any writing. The computer printout also tells you when sentences need trimming. By taking an idea to a practical conclusion, General Motors has evolved a tool that can help anyone who needs clear communication.

Richard Jilbert

Senior Project Engineer, Service Research
General Motors Service Development Center

The key, as far as we are concerned, to having a message understood is continual testing and refinement until goals for understandability are met. What we learned from focus-group testing with a broad cross-section of the population not only taught us a lesson in plain English, but also a lesson in the transfer of technical knowledge to the lay public.

Many communications miss their mark because they are not constructed with their audience in mind, and the transfer of knowledge becomes a difficult one. Some of our initial "Healthcare" ads were viewed by consumers as scary because of the side effects discussed. They had to be toned down. Some simple terms to many of us, such as "hypertension," caused less-educated consumers to avoid reading the ad. Yet we found if we introduced the phrase "high blood pressure" first, and then used the word "hypertension" later in the ad, the message was readily understood.

Grant Denison

Vice President, Planning and
Business Development
Pfizer, Inc.

What are the critical factors in a plain English project? One is project management and the other is how you actually get plain English.

On the project management side, we've heard this morning about the importance of commitment from the top and the importance of getting all the actors involved as a task force for review but not as the committee to actually write the document.

We've heard about the importance of finding someone in the company who is dedicated to the project to be the project director and to be the link between the technical side and the writing side. You need to bring together the people who can write with the people who have the technical expertise. I think there's a real need in the future for people in individual industries who have both the technical expertise and the knowledge of writing.

The other side is how to do it. Before you write, you have to sit down and think about the goal you're trying to achieve through the document, who your audience is, and what your audience wants. Focus-group interviews are an excellent technique for getting some general information about the clarity of a document. We also use a paraphrase technique in which we actually ask people to read a part of a document and then tell us in their own words what it means. Then through linguistic analysis, we can find out what particular aspect of the document they understood, didn't understand, or didn't remember.

Dr. Janice Redish
Director
Document Design Center
American Institutes for Research

2. Plain English and the Law

I am not proud to be part of a profession that is ridiculed for the language that it uses. I don't think it helps lawyers professionally, and I think it impedes the work that lawyers can do in advancing social causes, in proposing better legislation, if they are looked at and laughed at. To me, one of the dominant benefits of the plain English movement is that I can be proud of the profession that I belong to, and I think it can accomplish a great deal.

We've discovered, despite all the statements to the contrary, that legal concepts can be explained in terms of much simpler and communicative language. When Citibank introduced on January 1, 1975, a simplified consumer promissory note, we came out with a rather dramatic change in the way banks communicate with their consumer customers. Frankly, I was surprised at the impact this document had. It received national and even international publicity and began to spark a whole new movement in consumer writing.

Carl Felsenfeld, Esquire

Vice President
Citibank, N.A.

Why do we make a state law requiring plain English contracts? The fundamental objective is to simplify contract communication. A contract involves a mutual agreement, the meeting of minds. How could anybody imagine that there would be any kind of bona fide agreement when consumer contracts had been written the way they had for so many years?

It seemed to me that nothing was going to be done unless we made a law. I talked to bar groups and some of the attorneys wanted a resolution of the uncertainty that was created by introducing new language. That was really at the heart of the problem. The reason the profession felt so threatened was very understandable. They had been taught over the years to use language in a particular way. Attorneys wanted certainty and they wanted to include a provision in the New York law requiring some department of the state to review the new forms and contracts, to provide approval. Frankly,

I was appalled. I thought there's nothing on earth that's less likely to occur than to get good results from a bureaucratic agency. I said to attorneys, "I think the resolution should be in the courts." And you know they laughed at me. So far, however, it has worked out very well, and I hope that continues to be the case.

Peter Sullivan
Assemblyman
New York State

I am not opposed to clear English and plain English state laws. Anything that contributes to our purpose in the field is good. My problem is that I think there is a more important step to be undertaken to accomplish our purpose. Some of the state laws themselves have problems. The ones that require the Flesch test, for example, to determine whether something is clear. Similarly, short words and short sentences are not necessarily clear.

My point is that you have to do something about the lawyers and the law schools. Law schools should become sensitive to the need to teach their students that writing clearly is a responsibility of the legal profession. Lawyers should be the ones who translate documents into plain English. The lawyer should be an expert in drafting and writing clearly—clearly in the sense that it can be understood by the person to whom it's addressed.

Michael Cardozo, Esquire
Committee on Legal Writing
American Bar Association

Here are my original objections to the New York State plain English statute in 1977—and the reasons I now support plain language state laws.

- ☐ **The statute would cause unending litigation and clog the courts.** In New York there have been four litigations and only two decisions. And they have been in courts of low dignity.
- ☐ **A state with a plain language law will become a pariah.** In fact, this has not happened. Instead of moving out of states with plain language laws, companies have complied with the laws.

- ☐ **The cost of compliance would be enormous.**
I think the cost of compliance has been outweighed by the public relations benefits and litigation savings. Where lawsuits have resulted, clarity has resulted in businesses being able to defend themselves.
- ☐ **Some documents simply can't be simplified.**
This is my favorite because by training I'm a real estate lawyer. I told Peter Sullivan that no one can simplify a mortgage, a deed, or a lease. I proved myself wrong when a client asked me to simplify a mortgage and then a lease.

Donald G. Glascoff, Jr., Esquire
Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft

3. The Social Benefits of Plain English

We must use the language competently and accurately. The well-being of the nation requires it. We have no hope of dealing with our problems, except by chance, unless we understand them. We cannot understand them, or one another, unless we dig ourselves out of the jargon and bloated language under which we Americans have been burying ourselves. That may not seem to be as dramatic a challenge as some others that face the country. But in the long run it is as pressing as any, and it may be in the short run as well.

It seems to me that when it comes to language, millions of Americans are being cheated. They're being cheated because they've never been led to understand the pleasure and the satisfaction that come from using the language imaginatively and precisely. Their lives are narrowed and impoverished as a result. The worst affliction from which the language now suffers is bloating. If the level of English we speak and write declines, we decline with it.

Edwin Newman
National Broadcasting Company

4. The Cost Benefits of Plain English

For the St. Paul, plain English has definitely improved productivity. Here are some of the ways:

- ☐ It's easier, quicker, and less expensive to bring new products to market.
- ☐ Simplified forms are easier and quicker to teach to new trainees.
- ☐ Our early start gave us a leg up on the industry when states began mandating plain English insurance policies.
- ☐ It's easier filing forms with state regulatory agencies and quicker getting approval of those filings.
- ☐ It's good customer relations . . . encouraging a view among customers, agents, and other insurance companies that the St. Paul is innovative, creative, and forward looking.

John Horton, CPCU

Manager of Forms Simplification

St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company

Tracking the bottom-line result of a plain English program is really nothing more than good record keeping, combined with objective and unbiased analysis.

We can offer a bit of advice about reading the results of field tests and tracking studies. And that is not to expect overnight success. People don't like change. Therefore, you should expect skepticism and perhaps a little tire-kicking both from consumers and perhaps from your own professionals in the industry. When introducing a reform, you may want to consider accompanying this change with a promotional campaign to communicate to those professionals and laymen in your industry the reasons for the change and the advantages they can expect.

In addition, you may well find that improvement in the real world would be incremental rather than immediate. During the period of introduction, you may actually see an increase in some of the problems that you were attempting to correct. This can be chalked up to what we see as audience familiarity or comfort level with the old document.

Virginia Glenn

Senior Associate

Yankelovich, Skelly and White, Inc.

At Bank of America, senior management recognizes the importance of plain language in customer communications. What we do and why we do it are wrapped up in the mandate from the Social Policy Committee, which is composed of the corporation's top executives. The committee voluntarily initiated this program in 1975 and reaffirmed it in 1979 and again in 1981.

We believe in helping the customer read and understand an agreement as easily and quickly as possible. In this increasingly complex world, making things simple is a must.

A satisfied customer more readily signs on the bottom line. In this respect, plain English contributes to the corporation's bottom line. By helping customers, we also help branch personnel and this enhances communication and overall productivity.

Alexander Liosnoff

Head, Editorial Coordination, Customer Forms
Bank of America

Over 90% of the 550 members of the American Council of Life Insurance are now issuing readable policies. It's too early to have any clear hard research on the benefit to our companies. But we are very optimistic that we will have several real benefits.

- ☐ Insurance policies written in plain, readable English meet consumer demand. In a 1980 survey, we found that consumers who have had difficulty understanding life insurance terminology bought at a 54% rate. Those who said they had no difficulty bought at a 68% rate.
- ☐ The likelihood that a policyholder will keep a policy should increase.
- ☐ Training should be more effective. Plain language will be easier for the new agent to understand. Also, experienced agents should feel more confident that they understand the policy and be more optimistic about their ability to explain its coverage.
- ☐ Paperwork will be cut. Simplified policies are shorter. We will save assembly time and storage space.
- ☐ We hope litigation will be reduced.
- ☐ Plain English should improve public relations and our image.

Barbara Bey

Director, Community Services
American Council of Life Insurance

Why did Sentry begin its Plain Talk Program? In 1970, the major purpose was to create a better industry image and to niche out an area for Sentry. We had low visibility and this was a tool to establish ourselves as a plain English company.

Research shows that visibility increased. Now, after ten years it is an opportune time to do research to determine if we have accomplished the other objective, understandability of the policy's provisions. We do know that our agents feel the policy is easier to present and reference, when that's needed. Now it's time to pursue extensive evaluation.

The danger has always been that when you introduce a program like Plain Talk, people want to measure the benefits right away. But people need time to get accustomed to change.

In the meantime, you not only need top management's commitment initially, you need the constant reaffirmation of that commitment. Over a ten-year period, people in the company have to know that the program continues to be a priority.

At Sentry, revisions and new products come from specific product areas. But the corporate communications department has to sign off and make sure that standards are maintained in all consumer documents.

Anne Rossmeier

Vice President, Planning
Sentry Insurance Company

During the time that the "Come to Shell for Answers" program has been in existence, and it was initiated in May 1976, we've distributed 1.2 billion books. We have received over 1 million inquiries. All but 200 have been positive—positive in the sense of asking for more books, thanking us for the information, giving testimonials to how they used the information in the books. We started this campaign with virtually a zero awareness level of our advertising activity; and by 1981, 66% of the population was aware of this campaign.

There are a variety of reasons this program worked. First of all, within the oil industry this was a unique campaign. Secondly, we provided information in very simple plain English. Many times we had to quarrel with our engineers and attorneys to make that happen. We didn't claim or promise anything but we delivered a benefit. And we used research and focus groups to find out people's reactions and to track the change in attitudes.

Joseph C. Jones, Jr.

Manager, Corporate Advertising
Shell Oil Company

Those who attended:

Ms. Melissa Allen, Assistant Director
Mortgage Bankers Association of
America
Washington, DC

Mr. Douglas G. Barley, Manager,
Consumer Education
General Electric Company
Louisville, KY

Honorable Malcolm Baldrige
Secretary of Commerce
U.S. Department of Commerce
Washington, DC

Ms. Barbara E. Bey, Director,
Community Services
American Council of Life Insurance
Washington, DC

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Home Owners Warranty Corporation
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Representative
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Erwin R. Steinberg, Ph.D.,
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Honorable Peter Sullivan,
Assemblyman
New York State Assembly
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Ms. Martha Yocum, Consumer Affairs
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